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ABSTRACT

Noting that since democratization of communication is part of the broad social process, and that any given form of democratic communication is the result of a dialectical tension between the social factors tending toward concentration of social power and contrary factors tending toward redistribution of that power, this paper argues that it is important to define democratization of communication in terms of a social process of structural change. To this end, the paper first summarizes the major objectives of current proposals for democratic communication. It then outlines an analytic model of the communication patterns within a social process of concentration-redistribution of social power. The paper next examines some of the major trends in contemporary communication policies in light of this model of structural change in order to determine to what extent the social logic of these policies actually does lead away from an authoritarian pattern of communication and toward the objectives of more democratic communication. (FL)

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# Contradictions
# In Contemporary Policies for Democratic Communication

by

Robert A. White

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Nearly all of the major policy models for public communications over the past one hundred years or more have been advanced in the name of democratisation of communication. As we run through the list of these proposals, we must stop to think what flaws and contradictions the critical theorists of a future generation will find in our own progressive thinking.

The libertarian model, epitomised in the thought of John Stuart Mill, was an attempt to free the press from the shackles of monarchical or oligarchical political censorship and permit all to express ideas openly. The beginnings of the popular press in the early nineteenth century--exemplified in the penny newspaper--saw in advertising one of the means to free media from dependence on wealthy patrons or political interests and place in the hands of the masses a newspaper that all could afford and find attractive reading.[1] The emphasis on objectivity, professionalism in journalism and the separation of factual reporting from editorial opinion was seen as a way to put the facts before the public so that all could make up their minds on public affairs on the basis of their personal critical judgement, not the manipulation of powerful interests.[2]

The model of the national public broadcasting systems developed in the 1920s and 1930s and extended to many developing countries in Africa and Asia in the 1950s and 1960s was considered by some of the proponents as a system of centralised control to ensure culturally uplifting education, diversified balance in programming and the promotion of national unity. The modernisation-diffusion concept of development communication was seen as a plan to make available to the information poor, especially in backward rural hinterlands, the technology of the developed centres of the world in a rapid and efficient manner. The global reach of new information

new information technologies embodied in satellites and computers was hailed by theorists such as McLuhan as creating a global village with easy, simultaneous access to information by all social classes in all parts of the world.

Each of these models of public communication is today rather widely questioned if not as an obstacle to democratisation of communication at least as being only an incomplete solution. It even gives us pause when we see some of the most repressive national security states in the Third World eagerly subscribing to the principle of national sovereignty in international communication systems.[3]

As critical researchers we must be aware of possible inconsistencies and limitations in our own concepts of democratic communication. If we are persons with some responsibility for national communication policies, we must look critically at the way these are actually being implemented. Policies usually profess to be concerned with more democratic, participatory communication, but in practice they may be leading in other directions. Most important, we must ask whether proposals for democratic communication will find support in a broader process of democratisation in national societies. The institutions of a democratic communication grow out of the particular historical conditions of a country, and the process may follow different paths to reach roughly similar goals depending on the socio-cultural and political traditions of that society. But it is unrealistic to expect a democratisation of communication if it is not part of a broader process of socio-cultural, economic and political equalisation at a national and international level.[4]

This paper will first attempt to summarise the major objectives of current proposals for democratic communication. This will provide a kind of definition of what is today included under the rubric of democratic

communication. Secondly, since democratisation of communication is part of a broader social process, and any given form of democratic communication is the result of a dialectical tension between the social factors tending toward concentration of social power and contrary factors tending toward redistribution of social power, it is important to define democratisation of communication in terms of a social process of structural change.[5] The second part of this paper will outline an analytic model of the communication patterns within a social process of concentration-redistribution of social power. The third and central part of the paper will examine some of the major trends in contemporary communication policies in the light of this model of structural change to determine to what extent the social logic of these policies actually does, in practice, lead away from an authoritarian pattern of communication and toward the objectives of more democratic communication.

## I Defining "Democratisation of Communication"

### A) Policy Objectives in Proposals for Democratic Communication

There are at least six major dimensions of the problem that are currently discussed:

1. The most elemental area of concern is inequality of access to information. Given the state of knowledge in a particular nation or in an international system, many do not have access to the information necessary for their basic human needs of health, education and personal development, occupations or for significant participation in local or national public decisions.[6] In most cases it is not just a matter of the information not being available, but not available in a form which is usable either because it is unrelated to information needs or because the accompanying socio-economic conditions which would enable people to apply information are not present.[7] The

problem of the information rich and the information poor is characteristic not only of different social status groups within a national society but of national societies at the international level.

What is needed is not just better extension of communication channels, alternative media, structural reorganisation, but a radical change in our concepts of information and communication, from source-oriented to user-oriented communication.[8]

2. A second dimension of the problem is that information input, almost by definition, is reserved to a small professional elite, and communication is largely unidirectional. The only indirect influence is that of the passive consumer who may choose not to use the media.

Communication systems should be reorganised to permit all sectors of the population to contribute to the pool of information that provides the basis for local or national decision-making and the basis for the allocation of resources in society.[9] All sectors of the population should have the opportunity to contribute to the formation of national cultures that define social values. The public should also have access to the tools of media production and the technical help to make their own programming.[10] Audiences should have the opportunity to collectively criticise, analyse and participate in the communication process as different groups want to organise themselves.[11]

3 At present decision-making in all aspects of policy and administration of public communication tends to be the preserve of a small professional elite or, in commercial systems, financial-advertising interests. It is proposed that there be established the mechanisms for broad consensual decision-making and permanent coordinating councils representing all sectors of the population, including minorities, in questions of general policy, the organisation and management of media

decisions on programming orientation, and the evaluation of programming as well as other aspects of performance.[12] A basic principle is that communication is an individual and social right and that society only delegates the execution of this right to professionals.[13]

4. If access to and control of channels of information is a social good and the equal right of every individual, then these cannot be taken as merchandise or the privilege of an "enlightened elite". The public has a right to demand accountability in the use of the power of information. To insure this accountability, the following kinds of measures are important:[14]

   a) The representative decision-making structures described in (3);

   b) Representative property structures, preferably behond the simple dichotomy of private commercial or state ownership;

   c) The development of new concepts of public law governing information and communication systems and the legal definition of rights such as the right to participate in the public communication process;

   d) Forms of financing public communication which protect this from any minority monopoly interests.

5. The public philosophy of communication based on Nineteenth Century liberal social ideals and libertarian principles is increasingly inadequate. A new public philosophy of communication is needed which provides a better understanding of information and communication in human and social development and which defines access to information channels and public participation not just as an expediency to insure an informed labour force or a stable democracy but as basic social rights.[15]

6. Finally, if the public is to exercise its basic rights and provide accountability for a social good, then education for more responsible

of the media and participation in public communications should become an integral part of basic education.

B) Locating Policy-Making Within a Process of Structural Change

These broad objectives constitute what might be called the public philosophy of communication: defining the basic personal and social rights, outlining essential communication functions in a society, and proposing the ideal institutional organisation of communications. To speak of policy, however, means establishing criteria for realising these objectives within the concrete historical process with its specific political, economic and socio-cultural conditions.[16]

Strictly speaking, democracy implies a participatory decision-making process, but in practice the possibility of participation demands a broad equalisation of influence within a decision-making process, and this equalisation of influence, in turn, rests upon an equalisation of the bases of social power which constitute influence in a particular society.

In virtually all societies we can observe tendencies toward the concentration of social power, and in some societies there is an immense concentration of power with a small elite controlling all central political, economic and socio-cultural functions. In such societies there is a massive rigidity and resistance to change in structures of power and privilege. But in the same societies we can observe simultaneous contrary reactive socio-political movements and proposals for redistribution of social power.[17] The question is: How does communication policy-making and planning for a democratisation of communication enter into these contrary tendencies?

At a certain level of concreteness a policy of democratisation can be concerned with alternative media emphasising popular access and control or with introducing participatory coordinating bodies. But at some point policy must take up problems related to the process of structural change

and the redistribution of social power and influence. Communication policy must outline how the democratisation of communication and information both contributes to and is derived from the broader process of democratisation in a society.

Some societies may have more developed and controlable mechanisms for planned intervention and direction of the social process, but the democratisation of communication is almost never simply a matter of social engineering. New communication institutions are generated by and emerge out of the juncture of historical conditions and conflicting demands in a society. More horizontal channels of communication, more participatory communication structures, the beginnings of new concepts of communication development are forged within public reactions to authoritarian tendencies, within socio-political movements and the demands of individuals and groups for the vindication of their rights and needs. In so far as communication researchers and policy makers are part of this historical process, they may contribute an element of more experienced planning and coherent direction.[18]

One aspect of communication policy-making is to analyse the major factors within a given society that are contributing to the concentration of social power and, specifically, how patterns of communication are contributing to the concentration of social power.[19] These latter analyses often are part of the ideologies of social movements that seek a permanent institutional organisation for the redistribution of strategic resources in a society and a continual process of redistribution of resources as a society develops.

An even more important aspect of communication policy-making, especially in societies with a massive, rigid concentration of social power, is the analysis of the dynamic factors of social change and the historical conditions of the dialectical tensions which are producing a new institutional

organisation of communication. It is an analysis of the inequities, the alienation and the repression that suggest the need for change. But the major focus is upon the public movements in reaction to the authoritarian structures because here we begin to see the concrete forms of a new direction. The initial concepts of policy often appear in the practice of these movements, and the development of a policy is a matter of refining these concepts, detecting emerging communication patterns, discovering new uses of media that were invented in the heat of the movement, and perfecting the organisational, technical and legal expressions of these new patterns. At the same time, new communication institutions seek support in the changing political, economic and cultural system. Communication policy thus becomes the practice of building on and facilitating a concrete historical process.[20]

In short, policy formulation is the social process, and unless policy making and the social process are themselves participatory, it is unlikely that the result will be a democratic pattern of communication.

## II Analysing Information-Communication Monopoly and Democratisation As a Social Process

### A) The Relation of Social Power and Authoritarian Communication Patterns

There are many ways one might approach the relation of social power and communication, but it is helpful to conceive of social power as the ability to impose one's wishes on another in an unbalanced, asymmetrical exchange.[21] When one party in an exchange holds strategic resources needed by the other and there are no alternative sources available, then the dependent party fills the gap by compliance. To sustain this dependency relationship, the party holding strategic resources must maintain the sense of need through definition of values and by preventing the dependent party from seeking alternative sources, usually by monopoly of the coercive power available.[22]

A first consequence of an asymmetrical power relation for communication is that holders of strategic resources can extract information, but need not give significant information in exchange.

Secondly, holders of strategic resources tend to be sought out for exchange and to become the centre of exchange networks, including the exchange of information. They are thus close to the centre of channels of communication. This centrality is, in itself, a source of social power because information centres are receiving many different kinds of information and develop the capacity to codify and use information.[23] The higher the concentration of strategic resources, the more likely it is that the pattern of communication will be rigidly hierarchical, with one major centre of communication in, for example, a national or international system. The powerful information centres are able to extract information through intermediaries to be relayed back to the centre but supplying very little significant information in return and with almost no horizontal communication channels developing between weak peripheral parties. This explains why, for example, peasant communities in the shadow of modern city continue for centuries without real communication. There has been no communication of precisely that kind of significant information that might affect the power relationship.

Thirdly, those who control strategic resources and are central in communication networks are in a position to define what is and what is not "information", at least "valid information". They define the common "language" and all information must fit into the structure of that language or at least they define the dominant symbols which organise information.[24] For example, if technical-economic sectors control the defined strategic resources in a society, then all aspects of life--political, educational, religious, etc.--will tend to be organised in terms of the symbols of

technical-economic development.

Fourthly, the prestige and status system, following the power structure, becomes itself a kind of language. In a society dominated by traditional modernising elites, peasants are, by definition, incapable of contributing to national decision-making. Everything associated with peasant identity is defined as non-information.

This analysis could be greatly extended, but it suffices to suggest some of the consequences for media systems.

1. The dominant elites develop an ideology which defines themselves as the most efficient patrons to whom the gathering and distribution of information may safely be entrusted. A system of ownership and management of media is developed in accordance with these interests. This legitimates their de facto ability to decide who gets what kind of information or who does not need information.
2. The media technology for gathering, storing, transmitting and displaying information is developed in ways which will activate the channels of communication they control. They decide what gets "invented" and what is not invented.
3. The media formats are defined in terms of the dominant symbol systems, and content obviously is what can fit into these formats and technology.
4. The "professional norms" and "communication ethics" defining accuracy, truthfulness, the rights of all involved all evolve in response to this structure.
5. Finally, the public is educated in what is regarded as valid information, and tastes for that entertainment and information are developed.

In all of this, there does not have to be any overt malevolent conspiracy to control the system. Once all is in place, the decisions of the patrons can be explained as the logical, efficient and effective way to

communicate. The parameters of public discourse are defined as well so that there may seem to be perfect freedom to voice opinions as long as it stays within the established rules of the public decision-making process. According to the logic of the system, it seems to be democratic in that everybody's needs (as they are defined) are taken care of and everybody not only has access to channels but are able to influence what is communicated.[25]

B) The Democratisation of Communication as a Process of Structural Change

Analysing the relation of authoritarian communication and the concentration of social power is relatively easy because there is a large body of critical research dealing with this. But developing a model of the democratisation of communication as part of the redistribution of social power is more difficult. What critical research there is in the mass of studies carried out largely in industrialised liberal democracies has been concerned with issues proposed by media reform movements such as the influence of advertising on children or the effects of sex and violence content in the media Some research touches on more fundamental problems of equity such as the status of women or ethnic minorities in media organisations and the portrayal of labour organisations and other lower-status minorities in television.[26] Much of the research on democratisation has dealt with small, isolated experiments of participation in local media, and there is little evidence of a redistribution of social power in this.[27] Generally, however, reform movements are limited because they do not enter into more fundamental, widespread problems of social equity, and they are often led by groups that do not experience directly the inequities, alienation and repression of concentrated social power.[28] Insofar as this research is funded for media administrative purposes, it is not expected to poke too deeply beyond the symptoms of the problem.

The best methodology for determining the factors in a process of structural change which lead toward the democratisation of communication may be to begin by analysing the reorganisation of communication patterns within broad, popularly-based movements which have sought a profound redistribution of social power.[29] Some of the best examples of this are the peasant agrarian movements and national liberation movements of this century out of which have emerged so many new models of political, economic and socio-cultural organisation. Here it is possible to do no more than suggest the broad outlines of such an analysis, but it indicates the kind of factors in a social process that are influential in the development of more democratic communication.

The beginnings of these movements are in situations where a fairly wide segment of the population has very unequal access to resources, low prestige and little chance of individual amelioration because of very asymmetrical power relations. The specific issue is frequently the sharp deterioration in the allocation of resources for the aggrieved group and a sharp increase in exploitative conditions in a period of general socio-economic improvement. For example, in a context of general agrarian modernisation, large landholders begin to expel semi-subsistence farmers from land in order to take advantage of new markets and improved technology.[30] Or, in a period of general prosperity, certain urban racial-ethnic groups find it more difficult to get employment. Often the key element in sparking off such a movement is that individuals or groups cannot get redress for their grievances or cannot solve economic problems through the existing vertical hierarchical structure of communication with the centres of administrative power. At a certain point there is a collective awareness that there is no solution through the existing structure of power and communication or they may become aware that that this pattern of communication extracts

information for purposes of control but gives no significant information in return. Or there may be an awareness that the whole symbol system denigrates their identity and their social opportunities. At this point individuals and groups reject the hierarchical channels of communication and extend horizontal channels among other aggreived groups to pool information, usually on the basis of much more symmetrical exchange.[31] These channels may activate existing information channels among lower-status or ethnic groups and utilise simple "folk media".

The survival of lower-status movements in the face of massive concentration of social power often depends on dissidence among elites, and the alliance of more sophisticated and powerful elite groups with lower status groups can develop into important communication channels. Because dissident urban-technical groups need a mass base, the pattern of information exchange is more likely to be symmetrical, and lower-status groups are more likely to obtain significant information and participation in decision-making at a national level. These alliances are often the beginning of the integration of communication professionals into a popular movement and the basis for participatory structures for media policy and administration.[32]

Many of the characteristics of a democratic communication described above may appear in these movements. Access and participation are important for sustaining the cohesion of the movement because mass support is often the most important strategic resource to counterbalance the entrenched power of national elites and participation may be the chief legitimating factor in this mass support. There is often in these movements a high value placed on the inherent right of every participant to be fully informed of decisions and to have the opportunity to be heard. New patterns of access and participation--indeed a new public philosophy of access--are embodied in the structure and ideology of the movement.

Since the network of communication in these movements develops on the periphery of the hierarchical structure of communication, the "centre of gravity" of this alternative pattern of communication is decentralised so that there are many points of access and participation open to lower-status people. It is radically different from a system of communication controlled from above that allows some token local access. In this case, the points of input are truly at the local, lower-status level because this is where the locus of power and legitimacy lies. Lower-status leadership and constituency also jealously maintain the control of their communication channels in order to guarantee the authenticity of information. There is concern that the kind of media used permit this local control. This is an attitude quite different from the alienation of passive consumers of a distant, foreign information source, and it is the basis for a continuing active involvement in the governance of a communication system.

Most important, these movements produce a new set of central symbols that redefine the perception of reality from a lower-status perspective and form the basis of a new language.[33] The new language re-evaluates the identity of the lower-status people (peasants are the bearers of the true values and virtues of the nation, black is beautiful, etc.) and accentuates the positive role of this group in the development of the nation. This legitimates the participation of these sectors in national decision-making and the major reallocation of all resources toward this group (educational opportunities, land, technical assistance, etc.). The new symbols and language cut across local and regional differences, status lines, ethnic and religious divisions and other divisions to open up new possibilities of sharing meaning and communicating on a common basis....While traditional elites tend to be internationally-oriented in their culture and outward looking, lower-status groups are much more rooted in the ecology of their residence.

This new language establishes the basis for a national culture congruent with the resources, geography and history of this place, and turns the national culture inward. This undercuts the tendency of elites to prefer linkages with international organisation and international communication and provides the authentic foundation for a policy of self-reliance and de-linking.[34]

In the practice of social action such as described here, there may emerge very innovative uses of media appropriate to the channels of communication within these movements and appropriate for the resources available. Perhaps more important than the technology itself are the symbol systems which define a new media language and the new social contexts which determine how these media are used.[35] Out of this combination develop entirely new programming formats which can be more participatory, embody kinds of news information which get at the deeper issues and foster a reflective liberating interaction with audiences. These efforts may start with very simple media such as mimeo newspapers, popular theatre, local radio or audio cassettes, but once these have taken on a different format they can evolve into a very different national information system. Sympathetic media specialists may be involved, but with the delegation of the movement itself. Professionalism and technical expertise which so often serve to separate the media from the people is redefined and develops in a new mould.

The relation of a social process of power redistribution and the democratisation of communication briefly outlined here is perhaps an ideal type built on many cases. But some of the processes are present in some degree and in some fashion in nearly all national contexts. It may be more difficult to detect this in more complex societies, especially in those with a national ideology that insists that "we have had our popular revolution and our communication institutions are democratic". But the role of critical research is precisely to unmask mistaken assumptions.

## III Do Contemporary Policy Models Lead Toward Democratic Communication?

Dealing with social processes of increasing concentration of social power and more authoritarian communication is difficult in the first place because one faces such deeply entrenched vested interests. But a more dangerous problem--and one that especially concerns communication researchers and policy makers--is that some of the major policy models which profess to be the basis for developing more democratic communication and which are the actual guidelines for present policy embody a great many contradictions and inconsistencies. Underlying these policy models are conceptions of communication development advanced by communication researchers which need to be questioned and reexamined. Coming to grips with the fallacies in our own thinking will be the result of the insights of many researchers and will be the fruit of continuing discussion. However, the third part of this paper will attempt to summarise some of the major problem areas in contemporary communication policies--as these are actually practiced--and examine these in the light of a broader social process of democratisation of communication.

### 1. The Influence of the Cultural Uplift-Modernisation-Diffusion Model

Very few communication researchers or policy makers would today subscribe to the modernisation-diffusion model of national and international communication development as it was proposed in the 1950s and 1960s, probably not even those who originally advanced these concepts.[36] Essentially this model conceived of national socio-cultural and economic development as the extension of the culture, technology and social organisation of the elite pole of the country or of the great world centres of culture and technology to the lower-status population and rural hinterlands of the country or to

less-developed countries. The task of communicating a higher culture, technology or other information is entrusted to the traditional, literate elites and/or the entrepreneurs of the country with the assumption that these are motivated at least by self-interest to share their information with the less advantaged. The major obstacle to communication is assumed to be the attitudes of backward people--their traditionalism, bad taste, superstition, fatalism, etc. This places a great deal of emphasis on the role of the mass media and central broadcasting bureaucracies in national life and development. It is presupposed that once the mass media channels between elites and lower-status or rural populations are in place, information will flow out and trickle down through two-step flows and interpersonal networks. This information will be useful and used simply because of the sheer rationality of what is proposed. There is little or no analysis of the problems of structural rigidity or the lack of resources of lower-status people to employ this knowledge.[37] It is taken for granted that if a market structure is established, then the enterprising and motivated will get the resources to use this information effectively.

Some of the logic of this model is embodied in nearly all of the national broadcasting foundations and commercial networks in various parts of the world.[38] And in spite of criticisms, this is still the dominant model of development communication in many developing countries. In practice, most developing countries are striving to build up a technologically advanced centre modeled largely after the North-Atlantic industrial nations and focussed on a national metropolis. The communication process is entrusted to a relatively autonomous urban-middle class technological bureaucracy, and information in areas of basic education, health, agriculture and industrial skills is extended out to rural areas through a hierarchy of intermediaries whose main motivation is to perform well enough so that

they will be transferred back to the metropolis as soon as possible.

Obviously this model incorporates aspects of verticalism, centralisation and professional isolation that opens it to easy control by powerful elites and presents formidable barriers to public accountability and participation. This accentuates the formation of an urban-technical elite class which, in developing countries, is increasingly North-oriented and increasingly separated culturally, socially and politically from the people they are supposed to serve. This is a "source" model of communication to begin with, and these sources are increasingly less able to speak the language of the people, less able to accept more decentralised, popular communication initiatives and less interested in communicating significant information. There is a growing concentration of information power in an urban-technical elite sector and an ever more rigid, less participatory communication system.

This concentration of information power may be most noticeable in some developing countries--often where the rhetoric of democracy is the strongest. But the model originates in the industrially developed countries of the North, and the same tendencies are strongly operative in these countries. The present moves toward the privatisation of knowledge would be but one example.

2. The Race to Catch Up in Communication Technology

The development of recent information technology, especially the combination of computers based on micro processors and satellites, has caught much of the world unprepared and unable to cope. The technology is so capital intensive and requires such an advanced technological base that information power is being concentrated in a few countries such as Japan and the United States.[39]

Leaders in many countries are aware that micro-processor technology

is affecting very radically the international division of labour and comparative economic advantage. Formerly, many less-developed countries in an early stage of industrialisation could expect to take advantage of a relatively cheap labour force to begin building up a competitive industrial base. Now, however, industrialised countries, facing economic problems, labour unrest and political crises are pulling labour-intensive manufacturing processes back to the home country and replacing these with capital-intensive processes based on computerisation. The priority political-economic policy in many countries is now to catch up technologically, even though even the most advanced countries of the South admit that this is almost a hopeless task. [40]

Much of this new computer and satellite technology by its very nature is intended to gain efficiencies by centralising the storage and transmission of information. This is rapidly increasing centralisation of information networks and is bringing information under the control of technological elites that makes public accountability ever more difficult. This centralisation is occurring both at a national and international level, and, in the midst of a world-wide economic crisis, efficiency is considered the basis of survival. For example, many Latin American countries find it quicker, more efficient and less costly to work with data banks in the U.S. than to develop their own. [41]

One could imagine ways of adapting the technology of information storage, transmission and display in ways that would encourage greater public access and participation, [42] with the interests of less advantaged sectors in mind. But in the panic to catch up, it is argued that there simply isn't time to worry about this. Even in countries which have had more of a tradition of public accountability, these considerations are being pushed aside and a free rein is being given to whatever entrepreneur can

come up with the quickest solution.

Much of this effort to catch up is justified in the name of a policy of national self-reliance and the protection of national political, economic and cultural autonomy. But in the case of less developed countries, unless self-reliance is part of a long-term plan of de-linking, internal democratisation of communication and some form of regional solidarity with other nations, it is more likely to mean an over-hasty commitment to transnational firms and greater dependence within the international system.[43] Some would advise that attempts to catch up in the area of these new technologies is virtually impossible for some developing nations and that it would be preferable to think in terms of an "alternative development" in communication technology. Unfortunately, most proposals for alternative development are still rather vague ideas.[44]

3. Democratisation Through Technology Itself

Many policy makers, facing the political and economic resistance to more profound structural change that democratic communications may imply, turn to the prophets who hold out hope that the new technologies will automatically change the existing patters of communication. Computers offer new methods of vast information storage and instant retrieval so that the individualised information needs will be responded to at the time, place and manner that the individual prefers. The proliferation of channels through direct broadcast satellites, cable and video cassettes means that every population segment--including lower-status groups--will be served. New techology also offers more interactive potential so that everybody can put information into the communication system.

There is some reason to doubt a basic premise in this argument, namely, that the sheer abundance of information automatically insures its wider

distribution and availability. The high cost of this technology may restrict the use of it to more affluent sectors or to groups whose high level of productivity insure a return to society. It may not make more information generally available, but more intensive, in-depth information may be provided to more highly selective, economically productive sectors. But even granting that more information will be available, the argument avoids the key questions of information control and the redistribution of social power.

One of the problems of authoritarian patterns of communication noted in Part II is that in asymmetrical power relations, rarely is truly significant information given which is relevant from the perspective of the dependent party. In the process of democratisation, one of the first steps of lower-status groups in establishing an alternative pattern is to redefine in terms of their own perspective what is information and to reorganise information around a new set of symbols so that it is relevant information for them. Thus, unless more participatory controls are established which defines the symbol systems that are coded into new communication technologies and define the social contexts in which technologies are typically used, there is not more information but simply noise. It is like two persons speaking two different languages.

The research on "knowledge gaps" suggests reasons why control may be especially important in an "information rich society". If much more information is made available in a social system but there is not a change in social structure or a better allocation of resources which enable some people to use more information, then the increase in information is irrelevant for those without opportunity and the socio-economic inequalities are increased by the new information.[45] One of the most pertinent examples of this for our present discussion of participation is access to public

decision-making processes. Much of the information made available in public communication systems deals with decisions at the level of the local community or in the nation. But unless there is a social structure that permits a wide participatory decision-making, then much of this information is irrelevant. For those involved in the decision-making in some degree, the information is source of power and influence on decisions. And the more information (not just noise) that an individual receives, the greater the differentiation of meaning areas in their knowledge and the more able they are to absorb more information. The answer to this situation is a change in social structure to afford more equal opportunities for the use of information, but also to make the available information more adapted to the capacities and real needs of lower-status people. This latter step implies some influence over the definition of information.

Even if information is relevant. the advent of the information rich society makes control doubly important. As information becomes more important in every aspect of our lives, we become more attuned to and dependent on information. If the information control structure remains authoritarian, then we are likely to become even more dependent on those who control information and more open to manipulation.[46] With rapid advances of information technology, a democratic control system becomes far more important for the direction of our personal lives and the development of society.

4. Democratic Access and Control in Local Media: Opening to the Future or Tokenism?

Although the objectives of democratic communication outlined in Part I are concerned with national systems, much of the research on access and participation describes experiences with local, community media.

The development of local, publicly controlled media or local media that permit access to and control of local programming are important

because they indicate that there is a need and a demand for participation in the public media. The experiences represent many degrees of participation, from simple phone-in programmes to cases where the medium is a public facility directed by a community council, allowing free access and freedom in the design of programming.[47] This policy of expanding access and participation has been most significant when it offers a voice to ethnic or lower-status groups or other minorities that otherwise would not be able to communicate within their own group or to the larger community. When a local medium is serving an oppressed and voiceless majority such as the Radio Popular in Latin America which offers access and participation to the population of landless and semi-subsistence peasants, this can be an extremely significant political and socio-cultural factor.

These experiences are demonstrating a wide variety of forms of participatory communication which indicate how a national system of democratic communication might develop. In communities where there is local access to radio, television or cable, an increasing number of non-professionals are learning to use local media and the mass media are gradually being demystified.[48] There is also increasing experience with public, representative governance of local media, especially through community councils.

There is evidence that the movement toward public-service, democratically controlled local media is spreading in various parts of the world and that this may well become an accepted and proven aspect of communication institutions. There is a growing opinion that a democratic system of communication should include this form of local, participatory media.

However, at present most of these experiences with local access and local control have been the exceptions that prove the rule of a dominant pattern of authoritarian communication. One has the impression that most of these experiences have been merely tolerated as a token expression of

participatory communication as long as it does not threaten any established interests. In Canada and the United States where cable television operates on a commercial basis, cable companies have reluctantly accepted the regulation that they must provide a public access channel and public access programming facilities. Usually this is a poorly funded appendage with poor equipment and inadequate technical assistance for the community groups that want to use the facility. When there is a regulation that local stations must have a local community broadcasting council, as in the case of the BBC local radio, the staff and manager have often resisted as much as possible outside influence. In other experiences in Europe, America and elsewhere, whenever there are budget cutbacks, whether in public or commericial systemm, the first activities to suffer are the public access and participation programmes. [49]

As long as public access is a tolerated and suspect appendage of the public or commerical system, any moves toward opening issues that are threatening to established interests, especially media interests, are discouraged. In Latin America the experiences with Radio Popular have been lauded for their work in popular education and community development, but when they have begun to represent the interests of peasant farmers, there has been constant harassment, withdrawal of broadcast licenses, bombings, etc.

The development of local media with fully public ownership under representative governance has been slow, and successful cases are rare. The problem of funding without co-option is one of the most serious with these experiences.

On the whole, one must conclude that access and participation--even in this relatively benign, local form--is far from being an integral part of the public philosophy of public communication in most countries and still further from being an integral part of national communication policies.[50]

## 5. The Paradox of a Non-Democratic Process of Policy-Making to Achieve A National Pattern of Democratic Communication

Currently, in the discussion of implementation of a New World Information and Communication Order, including moves toward more democratic communication, the emphasis is on the formulation of national communication policies and plans.

In practice, policy formulation is often conceived of as the work of a planning office in a ministry and a small circle of associated experts. Implementation is expected to begin with governmental legislative debate and executive decision. Implementation is planned as the action of a governmental bureaucracy.

Obviously, achieving the objectives of democratic communication outlined in Part I requires at some point an authoritative process of public planning and decision. However, the MacBride Report is very explicit in recommending that policy formulation should be a participatory process involving all social sectors of the nation.[51] And if the central thesis of this paper is valid, that the democratisation of communication is social change emerging out of a process of structural change, then communication policies must somehow build out of the experiences and initiatives that are developing in a country. The policies most congruent with the particular culture and process of socio-political development are likely to come out of the experiences of popular organisations and the conceptions of participatory communication that are embodied in popular movements. Too often policy formation is a collection of high ideals based on comparative international study, but little related to the process toward democratic communication in the country and little calculated to foster the beginnings of indigenous institutions of participatory communication in that socio-cultural setting. As a result, the very groups that might be expected to

give political support to the policy fail to see their aspirations reflected in that policy.

It also seems important not simply to incorporate ideas of groups working toward democratic communication but, in so far as is practical, to involve them in the policy formulation process. These are more likely to be the real protagonists of more participatory communication, while those most closely associated with governmental action feel the pressure of powerful media interests or the inertia of bureaucracies. This approach is often slower and less brilliant, but in the long run it may be more solid.

6. Decentralisation of Media Systems

Most countries considering a policy of democratisation of communication are starting with a media organisation of highly centralised public broadcasting systems or commerical firms linked with powerful financial interests. Whether public or commercial these broadcasting institutions and newspaper organisations are managed and staffed by media professionals whose identity lies precisely in their autonomy from any kind of direct public accountability. For various reasons these organisations are extremely resistant to any proposals for public access or representative public councils. If they are beholden to anybody, it is to the powerful public figures and the public bureaucracies or large private firms from whom they must get the information that constitutes news. It is difficult for the public to conceive of access and participation because they are so distant geographically, socially and culturally. These media organisations are located in large urban centres, and the distance of rural, lower-status people, who form the majority of the population in developing countries, is especially great.

In some new nations it may be expedient to preserve a centralised media system, inherited from a colonial period, for reasons of economics, better use of professionally trained persons and especially to weld diverse tribal, ethnic and linguistic groups into a single nation.

Bringing these centralised media into some structure of public accountability is essential to any policy of democratic communications. However, it also seems important, especially in developing countries, to encourage the development of a complementary and balancing decentralised media.[52]

Geographical decentralisation in the form of local, market-town radio or the rural press brings the media much closer to the local interests local issues and problems, local cultures and ethnic identities. Local media can also incorporate elements of traditional communication or the formats of local folk media. One of the major problems of the centralised media in developing countries is that it usually borrows its formats from the international media culture and casts its entertainment and news in a "language" that is amenable primarily to its urban-middle class audience. In centralised organisations media professionals are themselves themselves frequently drawn from an urban middle class and have a more Westernised education. They have few ties with an indigenous culture and find it difficult to express themselves in local cultures. Local media are more likely to work with local people, perhaps less professionally trained, but capable of adapting local cultural expression to the radio or press medium. They create styles of expression which may later be usable in the national media.

With the multiplication of local media there is also a greater possibility for access and participation, and, with the proper kind of public interest management, local media can include representative lower-status groups.

A decentralisation along the lines of major social sectors may also be advisable. A flexibility that permits and encourages minorities and lower-status popular movments to develop media under their own control can be an important aspect of participatory communication. The development of the rural press in some countries of Africa or the Popular Radio in Latin America would be some examples of this.[53] Such local media allows these groups and movements to reorganise information around symbols that are meaningful to them and adapt information to the specific needs they may have.

CONCLUSIONS:

Research in Support of a Policy of Democratic Communication

Nearly all of the current proposals for a policy of democratic communication emphasise in some way that it is a pervasive authoritarian power structure that sustains the monopoly on communication. Democratisation of communication is seen as part of a larger process of structural change and the redistribution of power in a society. If we attempt short cuts which we think will ameliorate the problems of authoritarian communication without more profound changes, sooner or later we are back where we started. Our questioning of the past proposals for the democratisation of communication is, in great part, a pointing out of their superficial and partial solutions. In justice we must recognise that many of these theorists in the past were aware that they were touching only part of the problem. The short cuts came usually when the concepts were incorporated into a practical policy looking for quick results.

We can observe simultaneous tendencies toward concentration and redistribution of social power in virtually all societies, and it is in the tension between these two tendencies that a process of structural change and democratisation of communication appears. A policy of democratisation

builds out of these movements toward a redistribution of social power and will attempt to foster the growth of new patterns of communication emerging in this social process. If policy makers are to foster these more democratic forms of communication, they must first be able to detect them and evaluate their significance in order to design supportive measures. It is here that communication research may have a new and important role.

The term "new role" is used advisedly because there is a growing awareness among communication researchers over the past ten or more years that much of the research tradition in the field of communication--concepts, methodology and research designs--has been in the service of an authoritarian communication.

The starting point of most research in communication has rarely been from the perspective of people who are the protagonists of a new pattern of communication, and rarely has research gone behind a particular organisation of media to analyse the socio-political movements that influenced this organisation. Rather the focus has been on the existing media organisations, the content of their messages, the significance of new media technology or other aspects of the self-contained subject of the media. The media are assumed to be cause of whatever is to be explained. Research is concerned with the influence of the media on society, but has not developed much explanation of how a society has produced a particular form of media or clarified the claims and responsibility for its media. Indirectly communication research has supported the sense of absolute autonomy among media owners and professionals, a media not really accountable to the public nor exercising an existence and authority delegated by the public. The social responsibility concept of media ethics remains a vague ideal while in practice media ethics is a list of prescriptions on how to stay out of trouble with the law.

The concern for measuring effects assumes a powerful source directly imprinting its message on passive receivers. Terminology such as "a media-shaped society" common among communication specialists indicates an acceptance of this centralised power. The purpose of effects research has been either to test the effectiveness of messages or to suggest ways of increasing the power of this effectiveness. If those funding the research disagree with the kind of effects, the purpose of the research is to show the harmfulness of this message and suggest a different message for a preferred effect. But the interest in effects continues.

A further consequence of this narrow focus on media and media effects is the use of a communication model in which communication is initiated by the source and which considers the information of the media source as normative. The measure of successful communication is the degree to which the passive consumer accepts the message exactly as it is proposed by the source. If the receiver is not getting the message, then something is wrong with the receiver and research is conducted either to increase the persuasiveness of the message or to explain the resistance to the rationality of the message in terms of the irrational attitudes of the receiver (traditionalism, fatalism, etc.). This tendency to make the source normative has relegated many people to the category of "the information poor" when in fact the information may simply not be relevant for them.

This narrow emphasis on media and media effects has also led to a premise in communication research that media information is an all-powerful panacea for problems of human and socio-economic development. The questioning of this premise began largely with Third World researchers who pointed out that more information was not necessarily a solution when social structure and allocation of productive resources that this structure implies make it impossible to use this information. The exclusive

emphasis on media information not only avoids the need of structural change, but also, because it exaggerates the role of centralised mass media, plays into the hands of elites who would use the media to inculcate an ideology of passive acceptance of inequities.

As a result of this questioning there are beginning to emerge new approaches in communication research which are more supportive of democratic communication, a pattern of communication expecting the public to be active in seeking and using information, active in seeking access to information channels and interested in participation. Central to these new approaches are concepts of communication which are user-oriented rather than media source-oriented.[54]

With this change of focus, researchers are discovering that the supposed passivity of media consumers and the knowledge gaps between source and receiver are,in part at least, a construct of a faulty, source-oriented concept of communication. Conventionally, communication models have reified and objectified information as if it existed apart from individuals and could be transported from source to receiver. The message as held by the source was considered normative. New approaches are looking more closely at the activity of individuals in seeking information to make sense out of a situation and to creatively construct meanings. In this view every message is the construction of some individual limited by time and space and can never completely fill the need of another individual who is also bound by time, space and change. Communication occurs when at least some aspect of the meanings of communicating persons are shared and these aspects are integrated into individual meaning patterns. Such rethinking of basic concepts of communication is important for research related to democratic communication because it shifts the focus away from knowledge gaps between a dependent receiver and the unique

powerful message holder to the most critical gaps in communication, "gaps that individuals see in their pictures of the world and sometimes try to fill with input from messages".[55]

However, to conceive of individuals seeking bits of information to create personal meanings abstracts the individual from social reality. We find groups--or a whole society--collectively trying to make sense out of situations and collectively creating new meanings and new patterns of communication. This collective process is most pertinent to the development of democratic communication when dependent, powerless sectors of society find the dominant pattern of communication supported by powerful elites not only meaningless but exploitative and seek new central symbols that reorganise a whole subculture of meanings and values.

Communication research can be most useful to the formulation of a policy of democratic communication if it can help detect alternative and more participatory patterns of communication emerging in a social process, new "languages" (patterns of meaning) and new forms of media expression, new ways of using media that encourage more participatory communication, new forms of accountibility of the media to the local or national community.

As critical researchers we avoid absolutising the value of popular movements as if these were the norm. Rather, in formulating policy we try to see how the state of the art of our public philosophy of communication is being realised within the historical process, and, as we examine this socio-cultural process from its own perspective, we are able perhaps to enrich our own conception of public philosophy of communication.

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